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Spiraling through the Glass Ceiling

Seven Critical Lessons for Negotiating a Leadership Position in Higher Education

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, I developed a metaphor for describing my personal and professional development. I called it

spiraling. My initial consciousness of this metaphor can be traced to the years between the end of college and the beginning of graduate school, a time of transition for anyone considering a career in academe.

During my senior year at Miami University in Ohio, I prepared an essay about my personal and professional aspirations for several national fellowship applications. In my essay, I reflected upon the fact that although I had accomplished most of my goals—indeed, I had exceeded my expectations—I did not feel any more confident as a senior than I had felt as a first-year student.

That feeling followed me to my first days at Yale, where I was a Woodrow Wilson and Ford Foundation fellow and suddenly found myself no longer a big fish in a little pond. I was, in fact, a little fish, or a fish among many big fish. To my great surprise, however, I began building relationships and negotiating interactions with those in my new community with veteran aplomb. The confidence I thought had eluded me was there after all. It was then that I first realized that I was going through a process I had experienced before, a process I likened to climbing a spiral staircase.

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When climbing a spiral staircase, you inevitably return to the same point on a vertical line but at a higher level. And so it is with life's experiences. Every now and then you return to a situation that appears familiar to you but, through your own progression, you now have the resources, the memory, and the confidence to propel yourself upward. This notion holds true even if that past experience was negative: the point is that you survived it.

This metaphor of spiraling or climbing a spiral staircase has served me well for the past thirty-five years. I have used it to navigate the many transitions in my career as a musician, a teacher, and a leader in higher education and the arts. Concomitantly, I have developed and relied upon several basic principles that have shaped and guided me during my career. These seven critical lessons for navigating a leadership position in higher education have been adapted from the penultimate chapter of *Breaking Through: The Making of Minority Executives in Corporate America* (Thomas and Gabarro 1999), a book based on twenty case studies of minority executives at three different corporations.

Lesson number one

Develop a personal means of remaining focused or centered, as the Quakers would call it, regardless of circumstances or situations. For some, remaining centered will mean meditating, for others it will mean prayer or some other form of contemplation. Exercise such as running, biking, working out, or yoga also can serve as an excellent means of centering. To use my own life as an example, I begin most days at 4:30 a.m. by meditating. Afterwards, I practice the cello and then, at 6:00, my wife and I



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go together to the gym. This routine, which I have practiced for a number of years, helps to ensure that I remain focused throughout the day and that I have the mental power to regain my inner equilibrium when something out of the ordinary happens.

As the Latin scribe Publilius Syrus wrote back in first century BC, “anyone can hold a helm when the sea is calm.” The challenge, of course, is to hold your grip firm when the storm comes. The ability to remain centered, to hold a firm grip, is essential for any assistant professor in the early years when you must manage all the people and forces competing for your time and attention. It will shore you up when you must think about and do several things at once, including preparing for your first class or classes and meeting a publication deadline. You may also find it particularly useful in committee meetings or other situations in which discussions become acrimonious.

The capacity to remain calm and perform consistently under stress is also imperative for anyone in a leadership position in higher education. During my five-year tenure as provost at Miami University, I invented an imaginary implement that I called the “S” shield. (You can imagine what “S” stands for.) I could access it at a moment’s notice, and I always had it available to me, figuratively speaking, particularly at university senate meetings. Lifting the shield in front of my face was a reminder to remain centered if I found myself becoming agitated by the tenor of the discussion. It could also deflect the acrimonious words being hurled at me. Thus, I had sufficient time to listen closely, contemplate precisely the nature of the statement, and respond appropriately.

Lesson number two

Build an ethical foundation for the work you do. It cannot be about the money. In fact, if it’s about the money then you probably entered the wrong field of endeavor. Teaching and engaging in scholarly pursuits at a college or university is, in my opinion, a privilege that carries with it a very special mission: to transform the lives of students. It is important to remember this fact on a daily basis—whether you are an assistant professor, an associate

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professor, a dean, a provost, or a president—particularly when your schedule appears to be overwhelming and you find yourself asking, Why am I doing this? Why am I attending this committee meeting? Why am I spending so much time with this student or this staff

member when he or she should know better?

It will be even more important if you begin to think they do not pay you enough to do these things. In *Life Work*, the poet and former University of Michigan professor Donald Hall describes the inseparable nature of his own life and work. “There are days, there are days,” he writes. “The best day begins with waking early because I want so much to get out of bed and start working. Usually something particular beckons so joyously, like a poem that I have good hope for that seems to go well. Would it look as happy today as it looked yesterday?” (2003, 41).

I, too, have had those best days when I could not wait to get up and play a particular piece or continue researching a subject that had captured my fascination or teach Gershwin’s marvelous opera *Porgy and Bess* to a group of eager students in my African American music class. My life’s work, your life’s work, cannot solely be about the money.

In addition to being the president of Wheaton College, I am also a professional cellist. I have performed in Carnegie Hall and currently play with the Klemperer Piano Trio based in London, England. I am telling you this not to brag but to begin the tale that has led me to this point. While I did not begin to play the cello until I was thirteen, within a year of taking up the instrument I was performing in a cello competition. There, Elizabeth Potteiger, the cellist in the Oxford String Quartet at Miami University who had invited me to attend a summer music workshop at the university, heard me perform. At the conclusion of the one-week workshop, she made an extraordinary offer: she would teach me free of charge if my parents would transport me from Cincinnati to Oxford, a distance of about thirty-five miles.

This offer had a profound impact on my life. Liz Potteiger was, by all rights, a renaissance woman. One of the founders of the Oxford quartet, she was also widely read and a world



traveler. She became the most influential mentor in my life, other than my parents. Every Saturday morning at 7:20 a.m.—yes, the early morning has always been my friend—I would board a bus in Cincinnati for the ninety-minute journey to Oxford and would not return home until 6:00 p.m.

I was a natural, a self-taught musician, but Liz Potteiger taught me how to play the cello as a thinking performer. She taught me how to execute goal-oriented movements, how to be certain that what was in my mind's ear was ultimately produced by the cello. She also taught me that the type of practice routine necessary to perform consistently well in public is analogous to the training of the athlete preparing for world-class competition. Every practice has to be intentional and goal directed. Liz Potteiger's teaching, guidance, encourage-

ment, and advice have informed much of my life ever since.

My passion for transforming the lives of students, then, is a result of my own experience; it is the primary motivation for the work I do. It is not necessary for you to have the same passion or motivation, but you should be able to answer the question "why do I do what I do?" with a response other than "for the money" or "for the prestige." Now, this is not to say that money is not important. It is. But the point is there has to be a greater good.

Lesson number three

Build a network of developmental relationships. One of the keys to spiraling through the glass ceiling in higher education, or in any profession for that matter, is mentoring. Mentors not only serve to provide advice and support, but they

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also can play a significant role in your professional and personal development, particularly early in your career. A mentor can help you understand the formal and informal policies, procedures, and agendas at your institution.

In my opinion, it is best to have several mentoring relationships to support the many aspects of your development. Also, it is important to assess these relationships periodically, because you will need different mentors at various stages of your career. For instance, it is likely that as a faculty member your post-tenure mentors will be different from your pre-tenure mentors. How can you find a mentor? Certainly not by waiting to be invited. Mentors, by and large, do not go hunting for mentees. You must seek them out. You must be proactive. And most importantly, you must present yourself in such a manner that potential mentors will be attracted to you.

Another of my mentors, Bryce Jordan, former president of Pennsylvania State University, encouraged me years ago—in fact, exactly ten years before I accepted the job as president of Wheaton—to start thinking about becoming a college president. He helped me to articulate my goals and values and to envision the type of place where I thought I could be most effective. With his encouragement, I decided that a small residential liberal arts college was the best place for me, a decision that I have been able to realize splendidly at Wheaton College.

Lesson number four

Do not underestimate the importance of institutional culture. America is barely one generation beyond legal separation by race; hence, the majority of organizations, corporations, and higher education institutions in this country are, by definition, monocultural.

“Fit” is a term that one often hears these days in higher education. For example, is he or she the right fit for our department, college, or university? Well, it works both ways.

Higher education institutions have to be the right fit for you, too. When you are considering whether an institution is indeed the right fit for you, you will need to ask yourself several questions: What is the climate like for women and people of color at the institution?

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What is the overall nature of intergroup relations on the campus? Is the institution interested in diversity for the right reasons? In other words, is diversity viewed as an educational asset or is social justice the sole basis for the institution’s desire to increase

the numbers of women and persons of color?

These are the kinds of questions you need to consider at all stages of your career, even if you spend your entire career at the same institution. What is more, if you find that you do not like certain aspects of your institutional culture, especially with respect to intergroup relations, then you have an obligation to effect change.

Lesson five

Take responsibility for your own career. No matter how supportive and effective your mentoring network is, you have to take responsibility for your own career advances. No one else can do that for you, especially if you are a woman or a person of color. Be assertive. Keep your network and allies active. Approach those whom you admire for advice. The worst thing that can happen to you is that they will say no. This is particularly true with respect to promotion and tenure, when your awareness of the informal agenda becomes critically important.

The promotion and tenure process is daunting. And it is overwhelming to almost everyone. The key to negotiating it without feeling overwhelmed is to have accurate information, and the way to get that information is to ask, to be proactive. Do not expect people to bring you the information, whether you are a faculty member or a member of the administration. And remember, any official guide or printed material will outline only the formal process for promotion and tenure or advancement. You must become aware of the informal process by speaking with older colleagues who have already been through it.

Lesson six

Race and gender matter, but they alone do not determine your fate. The authors of *The Making of Minority Executives* found that, despite the existence of extra challenges and scrutiny, the executives in their study never took race to be a determining factor in their professional



development and career advancement. This does not mean that one should be naive about the very real challenges that women and people of color face in the workplace. But it does mean that one should treat problems that appear to be racial or gender-oriented as solvable. It also means that one should be aware of what W. E. B. DuBois called the double consciousness of persons of color in America and aware of the fact that, despite the growing numbers of women in these institutions of higher education, there still are gender issues in America.

My dad always taught my brothers and me that, even though others might not appreciate our beauty and brilliance, we should always walk with our heads held high and be proud black men. He also taught us that, in addition to being black, we too are Americans entitled to all the same rights, privileges, and opportunities as the majority and we should not hesitate to take advantage of them. For those of us working in institutions of higher education, this means we should never be afraid to assert our perspective in discussions. We should always believe in the great value of that perspective.

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Lesson number seven

Do not forget to take time for yourself and for your family. This may seem like a simplistic matter, but as one who has been married for more than twenty-six years, I can tell you that you really have to work on this aspect of your life. Advancing your career should not come at the expense of your family.

Family is fundamental to me because I come from a family that has celebrated its history for almost a hundred years. I lived in Germany for five years. Early on, I thought I wanted to stay there forever. Then, one day I realized that if I were to remain in Germany the rest of my life, I and any progeny that I might have would be disconnected from our family history. To me, that was more important. And so, while my heart wanted to remain in Germany, my head said I needed to be back here at home. Family is essential to me, and so too is acknowledging the vital contributions my family has made to my success.

Every time I walk into Park Hall, the administration building at Wheaton, I am cognizant of the fact that I am standing on the shoulders of my foremothers and forefathers. That really gives me a great deal of energy every day and every time I think about it. It is very important. My father was the first black manager at the Cincinnati Milacron, which at the time was the world's largest machine tool company. He accomplished this goal without a college degree. In fact, he did not even finish high school. He went to the tenth grade, and then he went to New York Tech for an industrial degree. I, his son, hold a doctorate from Yale University, and I am the first black president of Wheaton College.

That notion is a source of both pride and inner strength to me every single day. You must also remember the relationship with your family or your partner. I find the best solution is simply to schedule time for lunch or dinner with your spouse or significant other—or quite frankly, if you do not have a partner, just for yourself for important activities on your calendar.

Conclusion

It is very obvious to me that the existence of the glass ceiling, for persons of color and for women, is a reality in American society today. Institutions of higher education are no exception. I have no doubt that this reality will

remain a factor in the career development of women and persons of color well into the twenty-first century. I maintain, however, that rather than feeling victimized by it, we should embrace it as an opportunity to assert ourselves by doing everything within our power, individually and collectively, to be competent, credible, and confident in our endeavors. And, I might add, to give back by one day taking our place as mentors for those in the next generation of scholars and administrators.

I hope these seven lessons give you some ideas to reflect on and strategies to contemplate, and that the metaphor of the spiral staircase is useful to you. They have been immensely useful to me in shaping a balanced and productive life and career. My challenge to you is to be cognizant of the glass ceiling, but with the implicit knowledge and understanding that it does not represent an insufferable barrier in your life. In those well-known words of the poet Langston Hughes (1995, 30), “Don’t you turn back. / Don’t you set down on the steps / ‘Cause you find it’s kinder hard. / Don’t you fall now— / For I’se still goin’ honey, / I’se still climbin’, / And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.” □

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